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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to present a case study of the context and process by which the Board adopted a policy, came to question that policy, and ultimately rescinded that policy, while maintaining legitimacy within its environment. In 1977, the Board of Directors of a large urban school district adopted a policy establishing successful passage of a "life skills" minimum competency test as a high school graduation requirement. In 1979, community groups were successful in persuading the Board to delay implementation of the requirement for one year. In 1981, the same community groups were successful in persuading the Board to delay implementation indefinitely. In early 1983, when the testing issue was again considered by the Board, the Board voted to eliminate passage of the test as a graduation requirement. While the minimum competency issue was going through these steps of acceptance, hesitation, and rejection, a desegregation plan was implemented successfully. To further illuminate these processes, five aspects of Board/staff/community behaviors relating to the desegration plan are compared to behaviors relating to the minimum competency issue. These aspects include Board commitment, superintendent commitment, rhetorical approach, information approach, and consensus-building. (BW)

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MINIMUM COMPETENCY

A CASE STUDY OF

ACCEPTANCE, HESITATION AND REJECTION

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Politics of Education

Introduction

During the late 1970s, the use of minimum competency tests of student learning of either basic skills or "survival" skills or "life skills" became increasingly popular; by the late 1970s, a substantial majority of states had established some sort of minimum competency testing program.

The minimum competency testing issue was - and is - complex. Although the National Institute of Education adversary evaluation hearing on the topic resulted in relatively reasoned discourse, if not agreement (Popham, 1981; Madaus, 1981), general debate over the issue was often tended to be acrimonious, accusatory and often bordering on the ad hominem.

The issue has been viewed as political as well as pedagogical, with many - particularly those in the private sector and in state legislatures - arguing that competency testing is necessary to ensure a continuing supply of educated members of the workforce, and arguing more generally that competency testing will provide the impetus necessary to counter a perceived lowering of standards in the public schools.

Litigation, most notably in Florida with the Debra P. vs. Turlington case, failed to bring closure to the issue, with an appeals court upholding some portions of Florida's testing program while rejecting other portions.

Despite the lack of clarification or agreement as to the purposes and assumptions of minimum competency testing, the instruments to be used for such testing, the standards for passage, or the applicability to various groups of students, many states and local school districts have adopted

policies encouraging or requiring the use of minimum competency tests.

One such district, as described below, became for a time part of the minimum competency movement, yet came to realize a certain hesitation in being on the bandwagon, and managed to descend - rather than fall - from the bandwagon over a six-year period.

In 1977, the Board of Directors of a large urban school district adopted a policy establishing successful passage of a "life skills" minimum competency test as a high school graduation requirement. In 1979, community groups were successful in persuading the Board to delay implementation of the requirement for one year. In 1981, the same community groups were successful in persuading the Board to delay implementation indefinitely. In early 1983, when the testing issue was again considered by the Board, the Board voted to eliminate passage of the test as a graduation requirement.

The purpose of this paper is to present a case study of the context and process by which the Board adopted a policy, came to question that policy, and ultimately rescinded that policy, while maintaining legitimacy within its environment.

General background

The district under consideration had, during the time of this study, a multi-ethnic enrollment of some 50,000 students. The District enjoyed a long history of public support. Overall student scores on nationally-normed tests were above the national average, although Black, Hispanic and American Indian students scored, on the average, considerably below the averages obtained by White and Asian students. During 1977, the central focus of the District was on desegregation. With broad community involvement and support, the District developed a plan to desegregate its schools without

court order or federal government intervention; implementation of this plan and legal defense (ultimately successful) consumed a large share of the District's time and resources. In 1978, the District dealt at length with the problem of declining enrollment. The District had lost half of its enrollment since 1964. Again, with broad community involvement, the District embarked on a program of massive school closures, involving some 18 elementary schools, two middle schools and two high schools.

Minimum competency - acceptance

Despite a thorough search of records and documents, along with interviews of Board members, District staff, and community group representatives, it is difficult to determine with precision the specific beginnings of the move toward making passage of a minimum competencies "life skills" test a high school graduation requirement in the District.

The general notion of competency had been articulated from time to time. In discussing Board goals for 1976-77, one Board member stated, "I would like a policy whereby every teacher and principal would be responsible for making basic skills a teaching priority. I would also like a testing program for competency in these skills . . . with written intervention programs for remedial help for those students who have not achieved grade level competency."

Board goals for 1976-77 included, "establish a policy of regular competency tests of students across all grade levels," and "development of intervention plans for programs and students who fall below minimum standards."

Specific reference to use of a minimum competency test as a graduation requirement was first made during a meeting of the Board on July 27, 1977.

There were some concerns raised by two Board members, but with relatively little overall discussion, the Board adopted staff-recommended graduation requirements for the Class of 1981, i.e., students who would begin the 9th grade in the fall of 1977. The requirements included: "In addition to meeting the credit requirements for graduation, students must successfully complete a Minimum Competencies Performance Test."

The Performance Test encompassed sixteen tasks or competencies (included herein as Appendix A). The Board indicated that the test was to be administered in the spring of the 11th grade year. Students who did not pass the test would have a second opportunity to pass the test in the fall of their senior year; for those who failed a second time, a third opportunity to pass the test would be offered in January of their senior year. Remediation classes were to be provided for students who failed on the third test try.

The Board did not set pass-fail cutoff standards; nor did the Board indicate whether successful completion of a remediation class would be an acceptable substitute for passage of the test.

Rather than use a commercially developed test, District staff elected to develop a test within the District. Five forms of the Performance Test were developed by District staff working in the Curriculum Division. Each form contained 44 items. The Performance Test was field tested for the first time in the fall of 1978. The field test involved a sample of 12th grade students in six of the district's twelve high schools.

Analysis of field test data was conducted by the District's Office of Tests and Measurements - a unit organizationally independent of the Curriculum Division.

Results of the field test were reported to the Board - and thus to the public - in July, 1979. The report identified substantial weaknesses in the five forms of the Performance Test. In addition, the report noted that

there were major discrepancies among ethnic groups in terms of successful passage (e.g., assuming that all of the competencies had to be passed successfully, White students in the sample were seven times more likely to pass the test than were Black students. The report also noted that females were more than twice as likely to pass the test as were males.

The many concerns about the Performance Test articulated in the public report of the Office of Tests and Measurements provided the impetus for a re-examination of the testing requirement.

Minimum competency - hesitation

At the August 1, 1979 Board meeting, one Board member raised concerns about minimum competency testing and reiterated concerns outlined in the field test report of the Office of Tests and Measurements. The concerns of the Board member were referred to a subcommittee of the Board for further study.

At the Board meeting on September 26, 1979, the subcommittee reported that it was unable to resolve the concerns, and requested that the minimum competency graduation issue be considered by the entire Board.

Community groups were alerted to the issue. As noted, the report of the field test results had been made public. One of the groups requesting a copy of the field test report was the local chapter of the Urban League, an organization with considerable educational leadership in the city. On October 18, 1979, the Urban League's Board of Directors passed a resolution sharply critical of the Performance Test and its proposed use as a graduation requirement. The Urban League called for elimination of use of the Performance Test as a graduation requirement, and called instead for programs of early identification and remediation to eliminate individual learning difficulties at the elementary grades.

Following passage of the resolution, Urban League staff urged other community groups involved in education issues to become informed about the minimum competency testing requirement and to support the League's position. Groups solicited were primarily those that had been involved with the Urban League during the two previous years of desegregation planning. At the same time, Urban League staff began lobbying Board members to change the graduation requirement; other groups soon became involved in the lobbying effort.

At the November 14, 1979 meeting, the Performance Test issue came before the Board. The Urban League's representative reviewed the League's position statement and raised some 16 additional issues and questions pertaining to the graduation requirement, including the matter of adequate notification, due process, sex/ethnic discrepancies in performance, the apparent lack of relationship between what had been taught to current 9th graders when they were in earlier grades and what was not being tested, and the lack of plans for remediation of students who failed the test. A representative of the American Friends Service Committee also testified, indicating full support for the Urban League's position.

One Board member responded to the testimony by noting that the Board had never really addressed the issues of competency testing. Another Board member noted that the Board subcommittee had not addressed the issues, but felt the Board should do so as a committee of the whole. In response, a high-ranking administrator told the Board that in effect the Board had, in 1977, instructed the staff that there would be the minimum competencies requirement for graduation, and the staff was simply complying with policy. After extended discussion, it was agreed that the Board would appoint an ad hoc committee to deal with concerns raised by Board members and community groups.

At subsequent meetings of the ad hoc committee on minimum competency, community group representatives continued to raise questions about the wisdom of the policy, and continued to threaten litigation.

The possibility of litigation was real: some two years earlier, the Board had been informed that the desegregation matter would be taken to court by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Church Council, and the American Civil Liberties Union.

The possibility of litigation was expressed directly to Board members by Urban League staff, and the possibility was reinforced with the receipt of a letter dated November 30, 1979, from an attorney associated with a public legal aid corporation. The attorney, acting on behalf of a parent of a District 10th grade student, expressed concern over the proposed graduation requirement, and requested extensive information regarding implementation of the requirement.

In conversations with community group representatives, some Board members indicated concern about the legal implications of minimum competency testing.

At the meeting of December 5, 1979, a number of community group representatives appeared before the Board to ask for postponement or abandonment of the use of the Performance Test as a graduation requirement. The League of Women Voters representative urged a delay, as did representatives of the NAACP, the American Jewish Committee, and the American Friends Service Committee. The Urban League representative indicated that similar support for a delay had been expressed by the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union, the Municipal League, and the interdenominational Church Council.

After considering the community groups' testimony, and after listening to Curriculum Division staff presentations which were, in effect, attempts to rebut community testimony, the Board voted 5-2 in favor of a one-year delay in implementation of the graduation requirement.

The first stage of hesitation was over, and during the months that followed, there was little Board activity regarding the Performance Test. A second field test was conducted, with resulted reported by the Office of Tests and Measurements in February, 1980. The report noted that although the test had been refined, there still remained major problems.

While the Board considered other matters, and while Curriculum Division staff continued to refine the Performance Test, community groups sought further information to support ultimate elimination of the test as a graduation requirement.

Throughout most of 1980, Urban League representatives attempted to obtain copies of evaluation reports concerning the District's remediation programs. Unpublished District reports suggested that the remediation efforts promised as part of the minimum competencies program were lacking in scope and effectiveness. Urban League staff knew of the reports and the data contained therein, but were unable to secure copies. In a letter dated December 3, 1980 to the District's general counsel, the Urban League noted the District's unwillingness to release information, and the League requested the general counsel's assistance. The reports were subsequently made public.

In February, 1981, a report on the third field test of the Performance Test was made available to the Board and the public. Again, community groups used negative information in the report to substantiate their demands for postponement and/or abandonment.

The report on the results of the third field test was reviewed by a subcommittee of the Board. At the March 11, 1981 meeting, it was reported to the Board that the subcommittee would be recommending another one-year delay in implementation. It was further reported to the Board that District staff would be asking for a one-year delay.

At the Board meeting on April 8, 1981, the Superintendent recommended delay for an additional year for a variety of reasons, including massive student movement due to school closures and unknowns of the District budget to address remediation of students who failed the test. Another administrator cited problems of school closures, including staffing, feeder pattern changes, and identification of teachers who would be responsible for remediation.

A motion was made "that the high school graduation requirements be amended to change the effective beginning for meeting the Minimum Competencies Performance Test Requirement from the graduating class of 1982 to a date to be determined after a full report from the administration (including budget effects on remediation), to be provided to the Board by September, 1981."

There was considerable debate among Board members over the motion, particularly regarding the "date to be determined" phrase.

According to Board minutes, one Board member argued that "if the Board breaks away from the minimum competencies requirement, he felt it was a clear signal to the Legislature that the Board is not concerned with basic competency within the system, and more dollars and programs will be cut."

Another Board member, a long-time opponent of minimum competency testing as a graduation requirement, responded with: "If the Legislature

takes delaying minimum competencies as a signal, then it would be increased evidence of their lack of wisdom."

After extended discussion, the Board voted 4-3 in favor of the motion to delay implementation to "a date to be determined." With the vote, the Board in effect ended the hesitation phase of the minimum competency testing issue, and throughout the remainder of 1981 and 1982, little was heard of the issue from either the Board, the staff, or the community.

Minimum Competency - rejection

There were major changes in the District during 1981: a new superintendent, a new assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and four new Board members. There was a major reduction in federal monies, and the minimum competencies program, which had been largely funded through federal grants, was drastically curtailed.

And during late 1981, the new superintendent articulated a new vision of "effective schools," involving several millions of dollars allocated for criterion-referenced testing systems pertaining to basic skills in reading. The effective schools plan, again with broad community involvement, was implemented beginning in December, 1981, and became the major District focus throughout 1982 and 1983. The plan emphasized early identification and remediation of learning difficulties, with disaggregation of test score results by ethnic group, socio-economic status, and gender, to help ensure that all students were learning basic skills.

The extensive discussions over testing and effective schools reminded one Board member that the minimum competency issue had been postponed, but not resolved. At a Board meeting on February 16, 1983, the Board member noted that the minimum competencies matter was still unresolved, and that

"it is high time that this matter is clarified for the benefit of staff, students and parents."

And at the Board meeting on March 2, 1983, the following motion was introduced: "I move that the 1983 graduation class and all subsequent graduating classes be exempt from passing the Minimum Competencies Performance Test as a requirement for high school graduation."

The motion passed by a 5-1 vote, with one member absent. The majority included a Board member who in previous years had been a strong supporter of the testing requirement.

Public reaction to the Board's action was positive and muted. There were no parades. Representatives of the groups opposing the testing requirement expressed support of the action to individual Board members. Media coverage was limited. One of the two metropolitan dailies made no comment. The other daily ran a lead editorial several days after the Board meeting. The editorial, entitled "A welcome shift in competency tests," asserted that Board members rated applause for their decision.

It was thus that the Board moved from acceptance of minimum competency testing as a graduation requirement in July, 1977, to hesitation, with a one-year delay in December, 1979, and an indefinite delay in April, 1981, and, finally to rejection of the requirement in March, 1983.

Analysis

As noted earlier in this paper, the District dealt with the minimum competency issue at approximately the same time it was dealing with the larger issue of the development and implementation of a District-wide school desegregation plan involving the mandatory assignment and busing of thousands

of students. While the minimum competency issue went through the stages of acceptance, hesitation and rejection, the desegregation plan was implemented successfully: schools opened in succeeding years without incident, divisiveness or racial polarization; enrollment stabilized; the electorate consistently rejected school board candidates opposing the desegregation plan; local tax levies were approved by overwhelming margins; and state challenges to the desegregation plan were fought successfully all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Given the differences in issue outcomes, it may be useful to compare five aspects of Board/staff/community behaviors relating to the desegregation plan with behaviors relating to the minimum competency issue. These aspects include (1) Board commitment, (2) superintendent commitment, (3) rhetorical approach, (4) information approach, and (5) concensus-building.

1. Board commitment

   Desegregation: The Board had a deep and active commitment to desegregating the schools. On numerous occasions, the Board articulated its strong desire to fulfill a Constitutional obligation, and its equally strong belief that all children would be better off in multi-racial environments than they would be if confined to segregated schools. The Board, rather than the staff, took the initiative in desegregation, and a major criteron in selection of a new superintendent immediately prior to the development of the desegregation plan was the superintendent's ability to make the plan succeed.

Competency: As indicated above, there was relatively little commitment to the idea of minimum competency testing as a graduation requirement. The requirement was merely accepted by the Board, and acceptance does not imply deep commitment. The Board never articulated a strong position that the requirement would meet either legal or pedagogical obligations. District staff members, rather than the Board, took the initiative in competency testing, and ability to deliver on competency testing as a graduation requirement was not a criterion used in selection of the superintendent.

2. Superintendent commitment

Desegregation: The superintendent evidenced a deep-rooted commitment to the desegregation plan. The Board's desire for a desegregation plan was equalled by the superintendent's desire to make the plan succeed, and the superintendent became strongly identified by the Board, staff and community as an active supporter of desegregation.

Competency: There is little tangible evidence of the superintendent's support of the minimum competency requirement. Board, staff and community, both at the time, and in retrospect, generally perceived the superintendent as committed to quality education for all students, but basically uninterested in the successful implemenation of the graduation requirement, and unwilling to commit time and resources to the effort.

3. Rhetorical approach

Desegregation: As Weaver (1953) suggests, methods of argument are a truer index of beliefs than explicit profession of principles. In the case of desegregation, the Board and staff tended to argue from definition, in terms of moral obligation, and in terms of the criteria of a fair, just and equitable plan.

Competency: The Board, at least in the early stages, and the staff - throughout the process - tended to argue from circumstance, i.e., in terms of "the facts standing around," in terms of the already-existing. In response to queries as to the rationale for the graduation requirement, the prevailing response was "because it is Board policy."

4. Information approach

Desegregation: The Board and staff shared information with each other and with the community. A coalition of community groups worked closely with the District in the development of an information base for desegregation planning and implementation; this information base was shared at numerous meetings with other community members.

Competency: Information regarding the testing requirement and its implications tended to be controlled, rather than shared. It has already been suggested that community groups felt the need to secure the assistance of the District's general counsel in obtaining information about the Performance Test and about remediation efforts for those who might fail the test. Noteworthy, too, is the apparent attitude toward information sharing on the part of Curriculum Division staff members who strongly supported the requirement. A September 28, 1979 memorandum from the

Curriculum Division staff to the Office of Tests and Measurements staff (i.e., the staff who had analyzed and made public negative information about the Performance Test) contained this admonition:

> "If, after analyzing data for the second evaluation report, there are questions from the Office of Tests and Measurements regarding the Minimum Competencies Program and/or legal concerns, these questions should be directed to the Minimum Competencies Office and not be incorporated into a public evaluation report on the Graduation Performance Test." [emphasis added.]

Given that many of the community groups seeking information about the testing requirement were the same groups directly participating in the development of information about the desegregation plan, the contrast in information approach was made even more apparent.

5. Consensus-building

Desegregation: Considerable effort was made by the Board, staff and community to increase consensus, i.e., congruence in perspectives as to goals and means between societal units (Etzioni, 1968). Consensus-building was a carefully articulated effort, with close working relationships established with a coalition of the business community, civil rights organizations, religious groups, and public officials. Detailed and extensive public relations plans were implemented, and the media were persuaded to become supporters of the plan, and to avoid sensationalism and divisiveness.

Competency: There is little evidence that the Board, staff and community were actively involved in consensus-building efforts. The Board did little to gain support for the graduation requirement. No public relations plans were developed, and there was no coalition of groups established

to support the requirement. Consensus-mobilization was left by default to District staff, and the staff - divided and in conflict over the issue, and lacking Board and superintendent active support - appeared disinclined to make efforts to mobilize.

The above comparison suggests that in terms of desegregation, one can see strong commitment and leadership from the Board and superintendent, a rhetorical approach from genera that reinforced the perception of the commitment, a willingness to share information, and an active consensus-building effort -- all contributing to the successful implementation of the desegregation plan. In contrast, in terms of minimum competency, one sees only acceptance from the Board, uninterest on the part of the superintendent, a rhetorical approach from circumstance that reinforced perceptions of the lack of commitment and leadership, withholding of information, and virtually no consensus-building effort -- all contributing to ultimate abandonment of the minimum competency effort.

After initial acceptance, the Board hesitated twice, then finally rescinded its policy on the minimum competency requirement, yet managed to retain its legitimacy. As noted earlier, there was little negative community reaction to the Board's actions, no demand for resignation or recall of Board members or the superintendent, and property tax levies continued to be approved by large majorities.

How was this accomplished, given the potential for volatility, emotionalism and controversy surrounding the minimum competency testing issue?

A key factor may have been the Board's lack of commitment, and, when faced with community opposition, the Board's desire to shift to a consensus-formation and information-seeking mode. The shift was enabled by the relationships already-established between the Board and community groups

during desegregation planning and implementation. Representatives of these groups (e.g., Urban League, American Friends Service Committee, PTSA, League of Women Voters, Church Council, NAACP, among others) were well-known to the Board members and accepted by Board members as legitimate. When these very same groups joined together in opposition to the testing requirement, the Board was inclined to listen to the concerns expressed, and to support community efforts at consensus-formation and information-seeking.

And for their part, given the already-established relationship, the community groups were inclined not only to want to see their position vindicated, but also inclined to achieve their goal without doing so at the expense of causing the Board to lose broad community support. In their many lobbying efforts, community groups tended to focus their concerns and attacks on the information (or the lack of information) provided by the staff, while avoiding ad hominem arguments directed toward the Board.

Thus community opposition and community support stemmed from the same groups, and these groups helped the Board maintain its legitimacy at each step of the way as the Board moved from acceptance, hesitation, and, finally, rejection of the minimum competency testing graduation requirement.

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APPENDIX A

Basic Tasks or Competencies - Minimum Competencies Performance Test

1. The student will be able to complete forms such as job applications, voter registration, ballots and written tests, such as a driver's license test.

2. The student will be able to count money and make change.

3. The student will be able to compute total wages and verify a pay check.

4. The student will be able to read and follow simple directions for operating appliances and assembling simple items.

5. The student will be able to read, follow and alter (if necessary) simple food preparation instructions.

6. The student will be able to read and interpret advertisements such as want ads and food ads.

7. The student will be able to read and intepret product labels as: inflammable, caution. The student will be able to read and recognize danger sings and symbols and know a survival vocabulary such as: EXIT, POISON, MEN, WOMEN, POLICE.

8. The student will be able to compare prices for food, housing and clothing.

9. The student will be able to read and interpret newspaper headlines, sub-heads and leads.

10. The student will be able to write simple business letters and informal letters.

11. The student will be able to use newspapers, schedules, time tables, simple charts, and road maps to locate and interpret information.

12. The student will be able to use the basic units of English and metric measurement.

13. The student will be able to read and use a telephone directory for general and emergency purposes.

14. The student will be able to give a clear and simple oral direction.

15. The student will be able to use a dictionary for such tasks as checking and correcting spelling.

16. The student will be able to follow oral directions to perform a simple task.